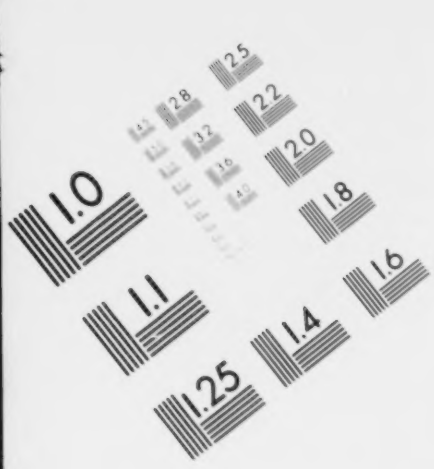

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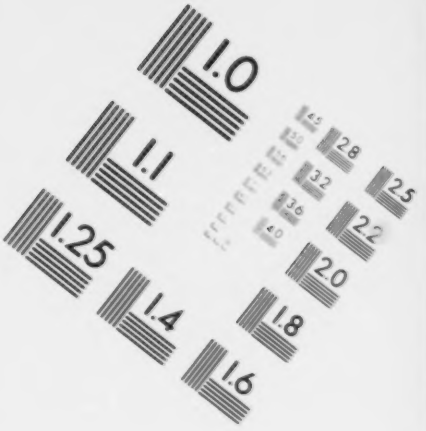

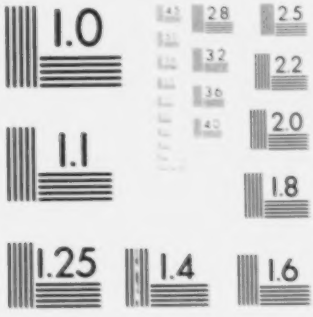

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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides guidelines to help teachers better understand the importance of forming alliances with the primary caregivers (birth parents, adoptive parents, step parents, foster parents, or guardians) of the children whom they teach. Specific recommendations are offered concerning the following factors: conferences in the home, in school, and by telephone; documentation of contacts or attempted contacts with parents or guardians; and the engagement and cooperation of resistant or aggressive parents. Initially, some basic principles and assumptions which are germane to establishing and maintaining trust and facilitating interactions are examined; for example, honest and positive two-way communication, and making certain that the student concerned views the teacher and the primary caregiver as a team united in support of common goals--the child's physical, emotional, and intellectual development. Fundamental to the process of establishing a common purpose are the assumptions of good will, competence, and shared responsibility. A conclusion is that the teacher's task is to communicate often; to invite and encourage parental presence in the classroom; and when communicating problems, to model a high degree of acceptance, trust, respect, clarity, and honesty. References and suggested readings are included. (LL)

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NURTURING THE PARENT TEACHER ALLIANCE

A GUIDE TO FORMING A FACILITATIVE RELATIONSHIP

FRANK HOWE Ph.D.
BETTY JO SIMMONS Ed.D.

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PREFACE

This guide to Facilitative Conferences has been prepared with the aim of helping teachers better understand the importance of forming alliances with those who are the primary caregivers of the children whom they teach. Although the word parent has been used throughout the document to refer to those who accept the privilege and responsibility of rearing and caring for children, there is no intention of overlooking the many individuals, other than parents, who lovingly assume such roles. In an ever changing society, it is very important to be mindful of the many different people who may be involved as primary caregivers. They may be birth parents, adoptive parents, step parents, foster parents, or guardians, either related or unrelated to the children. The actual familial background of those who have become responsible for children is far less important than the relationship that is forged as teachers reach out to form the kind of alliance which will permit children to understand the home and school are working together to assure their success.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers have many professional responsibilities, but none is more important than that of establishing a productive working relationship with the parents or guardians of their children. Lamentably, home and school are too often perceived as distinct and unrelated entities in a child's life. The gap between the two may at times seem divisively wide and uncrossable. Teacher expectations of pupils are intricately connected to teacher expectations of parents and to parent expectations of teachers. When questioned about the nature of a productive home school relationship a typical teacher may reply, "Well, I would like my parents to give their children more help in areas of weakness, provide more support for school rules and disciplinary actions, and attend

parent-teacher conferences" (Simmons, 1990). The importance of productive ongoing involvement between parents and teachers is clear and readily acknowledged by most teachers but the means by which such relationships are sought and secured is less clear and often an area of great concern.

In order to be really successful in working with the parents or guardians of children, teachers must not only desire good relationships but must also be prepared to actively facilitate such interactions. Unfortunately, most teacher preparation programs fail to include any substantive instruction in how to promote ongoing appropriate parent-teacher-student interaction. The purpose of this document is to provide some guidelines for proactive leadership on the part of teachers as they seek to improve student achievement by cultivating a partnership

with the most significant adults in the child's life. Explicit recommendations are herein made concerning conferences in the home, in school, and by phone. Suggestions are offered for documenting contacts or attempted contacts with the parents or guardians. Specific suggestions are also offered for engaging and seeking the cooperation of resistant or aggressive parents. Initially, however, it is important to examine some basic principles and assumptions which are germane to establishing and maintaining open, trusting, and facilitative interactions.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

A worthwhile relationship between home and school does not develop automatically. It demands hard work and determination. Efforts to establish such a relationship may frequently be exasperating and seemingly unproductive.

Yet, for the teacher who is willing to invest in this process in order to understand children, the benefits are high. It should be kept in mind that as much as teachers need to know about the home perspective, parents have an even greater need to know how their children are doing from the school perspective. Therefore, the first and most basic principle is to recognize the need to secure honest and positive two-way communication which will result in truly facilitative conferences.

Successful communication is one of the corner stones to successful parenting and to successful teaching -- the two most important and most difficult jobs we have. The notion that teachers and parents need to communicate regularly and frequently about the children in their care is not new. The means by which this communication can be carried out in a

positive, facilitative manner is not necessarily obvious however to parents or teachers. In an ideal school environment parents and teachers would contact each other frequently, spontaneously to discuss ways in which they can mutually support their children's learning. In most real world settings however parents and teachers directly communicate with each other on an infrequent basis and usually when one or both are frustrated with or worried about a child. Typical communications then between the significant adults in a child's life often occur in the context of some emotional discomfort and apprehension. A teacher wishing to communicate successfully with parents must therefore consider the emotional, social, and intellectual climate in which this communication is to occur and be willing to accommodate a variety of concerns and a variety of

starting points from which successful communication may commence.

The second principle for successful facilitative conferences is to make certain everyone, especially the child concerned, views the teacher and the parents as a team united in support of common goals. Thus, to begin the process of successful communication it is helpful to conceptualize the teacher-parent relationship as an alliance of concerned adults whose focus is the growth, development, and well being of a child. Teachers and parents share a key and rewarding responsibility. Their task is to provide a nurturing and challenging environment which will facilitate the unfolding and realization of each child's unique human potential. Ideally this is a shared partnership. The notion of a parent-teacher alliance, however, is not always successfully communicated to

parents by teachers. Teachers and parents have the unique potential to create a consistent supportive foundation of clear guidelines, firm yet realistic expectations, and genuine acceptance and approval upon which each child can build his or her understanding of the universe. A lack of clarity in communication between parents and teachers can undermine this notion of consistency and present to the child a set of confusing and even conflicting options and expectations.

FACILITATIVE ASSUMPTIONS

In addition to the basic principles which form the cornerstones of facilitative conferences, there are certain assumptions which form the foundation for the successful parent-teacher alliance. These assumptions are built upon feelings of mutual respect and genuine concern for the well being of

children. When cooperative, rather than adversarial, attitudes prevail teachers and parents can generally work out most of the problems faced by young people. Fundamental to the process of establishing a common purpose are the following assumptions:

1. ***Assume good will.*** When parents and teachers meet to discuss a problem about a child, each should assume the person they are talking with cares about the child and wants him or her to do well. Expressions of concern may vary widely or be masked due to shame or anxiety but a fair assumption is that the vast majority of the parents have the best interests of their children at heart. The definitions of "best interest" may also vary widely but that is a reflection of one's understanding and experience, not a measure of one's love.

2. ***Assume competence.*** Teachers and

parents may have very different ideas or no ideas about the best way to resolve a problem but when two or three caring adults put their heads together in a child's best interest it is also a fair assumption that they will be able to come up with a workable solution.

3. Assume a shared responsibility. When mapping out a plan to help Susie with Social Studies or Albert with polite speech, it is most useful to assume joint ownership in the solutions. Parents, teacher, and Susie, or Albert, all need to cooperate and participate in the solution. No one gets to be a passive observer. It's not a question of loading a problem on one set of shoulders or another. The task is to work as a team towards a common goal.

TYPES OF CONFERENCES

At every contact, teachers must assure parents that they are deeply concerned about the success of each child as an individual. This is why early contact with the home is essential. Too often no connection is made until problems arise and the process of building a relationship is jeopardized by mutual frustration and anxiety. This is unfortunate since it is so easy to begin a pleasant relationship based on mutual respect when teachers reach out to parents before difficulties arise. Although sending letters to the home is a good way of making early contact, they may lack the warmth, intimacy, and interaction which are made possible through direct conferences. Teachers who are successful in working with parents will generally avail themselves of either a face-to-face conference or a telephone conference early

in the academic year.

Home Visits

One of the most effective but least used kinds of conferences is the home visit. Finding the time and personal energy to engage in this process requires a special kind of commitment. Those who do so find that they are blessed with a far greater understanding of their children than they ever expected. Such teachers not only learn how the child lives on a day-to-day basis, they also forge a meaningful and personal link with many parents whom they would otherwise never see. It must be remembered some parents feel very uncomfortable coming to school. For more than a few, school was never a happy place and for others a residual feeling of not being welcomed there makes returning a near impossibility. One of the basic principles of facilitative

conferences is to keep communication open. A visit in the home can help to do this because it tells parents that the teacher is concerned enough to go the extra mile and that the relationship is expected to be more than one-sided. The teacher who is willing to commit the time and resources to make a home visit is one whose desire is to see children succeed. This measure of teacher commitment calls for and encourages a like response in the parent.

Although the content of the conference in the home will not differ markedly from any other face-to-face contact in terms of goals and outcomes, there are some considerations which need to be given serious attention.

1. Make an appointment. Earlier an assumption of good will was made. It is therefore advisable not to let a small matter undermine a large expectation. An unannounced intrusion into the privacy of

another may preclude a warm reception. Everyone likes to tidy the house and put on a clean change of clothing before guests arrive. It would be foolish to put a potentially productive association at risk because of failure to let the family know a visit is planned.

2. State the purpose of the visit. Although it is a good idea for teachers to visit all of their children, it is not always feasible to do so. However, if all children are to be visited, then the explanation for the visit is simple. However, if only a few are to be visited, the teacher must be very careful to phrase a tactful but honest reason for the visit. For example, if most parents have attended an in-school conference, the teacher may plan to visit only those homes which were not represented. In this case, the teacher could simply say "I realize it was impossible for you and some of my other

parents to be present at the opening of school conference, therefore, I am trying to visit each of your homes in order to get better acquainted and discuss each child's early adjustment to school."

3. Plan to visit early in the school year. In fact, if rolls become available in the summer, visit before school starts. This counters speculation that the teacher is coming because there is a problem. It also gives the teacher the opportunity to learn something personal about each child. Such information can make the beginning of a new class much easier for teachers, children, and parents

4. Use caution and common sense. Not all neighborhoods are safe. For this reason, it is often advisable to team up with another teacher who wishes to visit children in the same area. At any rate, teachers should be sure to tell someone, such as the building principal, exactly

where they are going and approximately what time they expect to return. Teachers should not take unnecessary risks and if there is any hint of danger, they should leave at once. It is particularly important to exercise extra caution if the visit is to be made at night.

5. Show respect for the family situation. Teachers who generally come from middle class homes may frequently be astonished by some of the living conditions and circumstances which are normal for many families. Avoid overt displays of surprise or disdain. Each home will bear some mark of the individuals who live there. Take the time to find something of interest, a family photograph for example, and comment on it. The education a teacher receives while on a home visit often provides the necessary understanding needed to enable a child to succeed at school. After all, the assumption is that the student's

education is a shared responsibility. If parents are to be encouraged to value and understand the school environment teachers should model a similar value and interest in the home.

6. Include the child when making plans to visit. An appointment should be made which will coincide with the time the child is there. It should not be assumed he or she will automatically be at home. A visit made prior to the opening of school will provide an excellent opportunity for the child and teacher to become acquainted. If the visit occurs after school opens whether its purpose is simply to know the family better or to solve a problem, the child will benefit greatly from seeing that the teacher is concerned about his or her well being.

7. Let the family know the relationship is to be continuous and interactive. Having made the effort to let parents know

the teacher is genuinely interested, the next step is to create an expectation for on-going contact. Leaving a card with one's name, phone numbers, and the best times to be reached is very helpful. Many parents lack transportation and find phone conferences the best avenue for ongoing communication.

Telephone Conferences

There is actually little or no excuse for teachers failing to use the telephone as a means of fostering facilitative conferences. The great majority of today's students have phones in their homes and they afford an excellent means for getting to know parents, letting them know the teacher wants to help their child, and providing immediate feedback concerning their child's performance. The following suggestions should be beneficial to teachers who wish to maximize use of

this powerful conference tool.

1. Call early. If a home visit has not already occurred, call each home during the first few days of school. This allows teachers to introduce themselves and to encourage parents to join with the teacher in a cooperative relationship. Students are also put on alert that they must give their best performance because their teacher is taking responsibility for working with the home seriously.

2. Call for positive reasons. When a student has enjoyed some particular success, turned in an exceptionally good piece of work, or simply made some noticeable improvement in a given area, a call to parents is especially appropriate. Nothing brings more delight to a parent than hearing good news about an offspring. Such an occurrence creates a feeling of competence for all concerned and helps solidify the teacher parent alliance.

3. Call to prevent problems. Bluestein (1989) notes "Getting your version to the parent before the child does can often prevent serious miscommunication or the anxiety of the parent wondering why 'the teacher never called me about that' "(p.18) A veteran special education teacher related a story of one of her emotionally disturbed students who was prone to crawl under tables. One day he did so and was inadvertently kicked in the eye by another child. The teacher immediately called the home. The parent's reactions was "It happens all the time. You did not need to be concerned since he was not really hurt." The wise teacher knew, however, that had the child gotten to the parent first, the reaction may have been much different.

4. Call to solve problems. When problems arise, teachers should let the child know they want to help solve them but that they

will also need his/her help, as well as the help of the parents. As soon as possible thereafter it is necessary to begin to involve the parents. In some situations, the problem can be satisfactorily addressed in its entirety by means of the telephone. In other cases, the phone may simply be used to describe the problem and to arrange a time for a face-to-face conference. The important thing is not to let the problem grow worse through inaction or lack of attention.

5. Call at appropriate times. While the dinner hour may afford the best opportunity to reach parents, it is generally not a desirable time to call. Parents, like everyone else, need time to get home, prepare the evening meal, and be able to relax a little before being "put back into gear". Try never to call a parent at work unless there is an

emergency or unless all other attempts have been in vain and the problem is too pressing to leave unattended. With American families working a multitude of schedules, it may actually become very difficult to find a convenient time to call. A useful approach is to specifically ask parents about convenient times to call in the introductory information typically sent home to be reviewed and signed at the beginning of each school year. This creates an expectation of communication between home and school and allows the teacher to reach parents when they are most ready and able to listen.

In-school Conferences

The most frequent kind of conference takes place at the school and usually results from something having gone awry. While conferences at school are desirable,

they should not be the only means of discussing a child's performance and they certainly should not be primarily remedial in nature. The proactive teacher will be concerned with facilitative conferences which are more likely to prevent problems. This proactive approach will take the following steps (Simmons, 1991):

1. Plan ahead. Get the facts. Prior to meeting with or discussing significant concerns with parents, teachers should have a clear understanding of what their concerns and expectations are. Teachers should be prepared to share work samples, portfolios, test scores, anecdotes, and any other information which has a direct bearing upon the purpose of the conference. For example, in some cases video tapes and audio tapes made of the student can be used to give a more complete picture of how well the student is doing or of areas in which improvements

are needed. The grade book should also be available but it should be used only to answer questions or provide additional information. The grade book should not be used as a means of proving the problem belongs to the student. Teachers must take the time to assemble relevant samples of work or information about the behavior in question and be able to explain to parents the significance and implications of such material.

2. Make a personal connection. At the outset of a meeting with parents, teachers should spend a few moments sharing some thoughts and feelings of a positive nature about their child and express appreciation of parents' concern as evidenced by their attendance at meeting. It is sometimes important for teachers to remember that whether parents initially appear as appreciative or hostile, defensive or aggressive, involved or detached they are

in fact there and have shown enough interest in their child and in the teacher's relationship with their child to discuss their concerns face to face.

3. Set an agenda for the meeting. Although this may have already been done by phone or note it is helpful to precede a discussion of specific concerns with some general statement as to the purpose of the meeting and the goals to be accomplished. It is also important that the teacher allow for parental input in this "agenda setting". A teacher models acceptance and respect by allowing parents a voice from the start in the course of their discussions. Teachers who encourage parents to participate in agenda setting simultaneously encourage the notion of shared responsibility when it comes to problem solving.

4. Attend to the environment by arranging for an appropriate and comfortable meeting

place. Privacy is important. Teachers should make sure they have a place where parents can discuss their child without intrusion. Care should be taken to provide a chair that is comfortable for the parent - preferably not a child-size chair - and it should be placed near the teacher's chair. Sitting behind a desk may make the teacher appear intimidating. Also files, record books, and other needed materials should be close at hand. Organizing materials will make the conference run smoothly. The classroom should be reasonably neat and free from distractions so that complete attention can be given to the parent and their child.

5. Dress and act as a professional. Teachers need to remember they are often judged by the way they look. They should

make certain they are impeccably groomed and appropriately dressed to meet parents. Whereas, it may not always be necessary to wear a suit, it would be better for teachers not to come to the conference clad in jeans and tennis shoes. Likewise, the voice should be kept low and well controlled. Equally as important as volume and tone is the nonverbal language which one uses. Gestures, body posture, and eye messages can do much to hinder or create facilitative conferences.

6. Establish positive rapport. Greet the parents warmly; welcome them into the classroom. Remember, parents are taxpayers - customers. The teacher should take a few minutes to establish rapport by asking them about their family or engaging in relevant "small talk". Offering coffee or drinks can personalize the conference. After restating the reason for the conference, the teacher needs to assure

the parent that information shared by parents will be treated as privileged information and be used for the benefit of the child. Before presenting data, it is important to hear the parents' perceptions about their child. Teachers need to encourage parents to freely express their ideas and opinions. Accustomed to doing most of the talking, some teachers find this difficult. Teachers must learn how to listen actively by maintaining eye contact with parents, and giving complete attention. Taking notes while listening communicates to parents that the teacher sincerely wants to understand their child. Rapport is enhanced when a teacher :

* takes time to create a friendly informal atmosphere
* maintains a positive attitude
* uses language that is understandable to parents (no educational jargon)
* listens carefully to what parents say
* reassures parents that their confidence will be respected

7. *Communicate accurately* by sharing clear, specific information with parents during the conferences. Once the parent has had an opportunity to share, the teacher should begin by describing the student's strong points in an accurate and behaviorally descriptive manner. Parents often appreciate reassurance that their child is regarded as an individual of worth. Of course, it is equally as important to describe the areas needing improvement. Here again, the teacher must be open and clear. The problem areas should be specifically identified and described. The goal is problem solving not blame assigning. When addressing difficult or troubling behavior that a child exhibits, it is important to realize that both teachers and parents may become frustrated at times. The task is to remain open, accepting, and objective even when parents do not. Teachers who model a

relaxed, interested, and dispassionate attitude encourage a similar response from those they encounter.

8. Be specific. Focus on specific behavior that needs attention and specific approaches to address problems. When describing problem behavior specifics as to actions, frequency, intensity, and duration enable parents to appreciate fully the nature of the concern. When asking parents for information regarding home behavior it is equally helpful to obtain the same level of specificity to insure an accurate picture of the child's behavior is developed. This same level of clarity is of even greater importance when discussing and developing an intervention plan. The clearer teachers and parents are on their planned responses to a child the more likely they are to consistently support each other in class and at home. This appropriate consistency greatly

facilitates adaptive behavior changes in the child.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN THE PARENT TEACHER CONFERENCE

Curiously, an essential member of the parent- teacher-child triad is often not included in the deliberations. Clearly the child plays an integral part in the teacher parent relationship. The child's ongoing growth and development is after all the basis of this relationship. This notion, however, of the child's ongoing development (social and intellectual) must be carefully considered when determining how and when the child may either facilitate or actually inhibit effective communication between parents and teachers. Including the child in communication between these important adults is fundamental but relying mainly, or even solely, on the child to negotiate this relationship leaves significant

opportunities for confusion, miscommunication, and frustration. This is especially true for younger children and for students of all ages who are experiencing significant academic and/or behavioral difficulties in the classroom.

Clearly the student is included in the ongoing process of formal and informal communication between home and school. The flow of paper to be reviewed, signed, or commented on seems at times overwhelming. One critical aspect of this communication system is the parent teacher conference. Some consideration can be given then to when and how the student may be appropriately included in the parent teacher conference. As a general rule, student inclusion is recommended. When teachers, parents, and the student join together as a team it is much easier to move away from blame assigning and towards problem solving. Student inclusion also

affords the opportunity for teacher and parents to present a united front to a student who may be attempting to manipulate parent or teacher feelings and perceptions as a means of avoidance. It also provides useful information to parents and teachers about how each interacts with the child. The following consideration are worth note when including a student in the conference :

1. Time and length of conference. This is especially important in the primary grades. Conferences in the late afternoon or evening may find the child tired, inattentive, and highly distractible and distracting. Older students may have work or social responsibilities which should be respected when scheduling the conference.

2. Parental Input. The notion of including the child may seem unexpected to some parents or the parents may have information they wish to share with

teacher but not the child. Discussing with the parents the intent and importance of including the child helps identify and address any such concerns.

3. Student Awareness and Opportunity to Plan. Just as the parents and the teacher are aware of the proposed meeting, the student should also be informed, and encouraged to prepare for this meeting by thinking about his or her concerns and what issues are important to discuss. This is, of course, presented to the student in an encouraging and developmentally appropriate manner. Students may even seek advice or support in preparing for the conference. This is to be encouraged as an extension of the learning and problem solving process.

4. Teacher as Bridge Between Parents and Student. There are times when school and home problems combine in uniquely frustrating ways which to some degree

place parents and children at odds with each other. Teachers must be aware that at such times high frustrations over mutual concerns can seriously impede effective communication. The teacher's task may be to find ways to encourage and allow parents and children to actually hear and clearly understand each other.

5. Active Participation by the Student. Students should be viewed as active participants in the dialogue and encouraged to contribute at a level appropriate to their intellectual, social, and emotional capabilities. Active involvement increases the student's sense of participation and commitment.

6. Maintaining focus. The student's input during a conference may at times stray from the topics at hand and may involve information or concerns about other students which have no genuine bearing on the student or the problems at hand.

Stories about problems others have experienced may also be used as a means of changing focus at times when parents and teacher are asking the student to attend to his/her own behavior. Regardless of the reasons for such digressions, the teacher needs to gently but clearly remind the student of the parameters of the discussion and refocus on appropriate problem identification and problem solving. Parents will appreciate a teacher who discourages gossip and will feel safer in sharing their own concerns in such an atmosphere.

While student inclusion is generally recommended, a teacher may decide against including the student in a conferences based on one or more of the following considerations :

A. Strained or Tenuous Parent-Teacher Relations. Despite the best efforts of a concerned teacher to establish and

maintain a positive cooperative alliance with parents there may be times when such relationships are greatly strained. A teacher may decide at such times that significant work must first be done between teacher and parents. The goal is to build a successful alliance with parents and then, at a subsequent meeting, invite the student to join into this healthy, productive relationship.

B. Student's Affective or Behavioral Concerns. There may be instances in which the student's problem behavior is so intense or so pervasive that such behavior will actually interfere with the ability of the teacher and the parents to successfully dialogue with each other. It may also be the case that a parent or teacher has identified a discussion topic, such as an impending divorce or a serious illness, that has yet to be shared with the child. Such emotionally laden concerns

may first require some thought and planning by adults before being appropriately shared with the student.

C. Strong Opposition. If for any reason parents or students are greatly opposed to student inclusion in the conference, unilaterally forcing the process rarely helps. A conference held with willing participants is generally more productive. A discussion topic regarding student inclusion in future meetings can certainly be explored as a useful goal.

PLAN OF ACTION

If the conference is centered on a problem, the teacher and parent and sometimes the child should work together to plan a course of action. The teacher needs to ask, "What can we do to solve this problem?" Enlist the parents' participation. Brainstorming possible solutions with the parent, and then

deciding which tactic will be most successful can be very productive. If the problem is incomplete homework, what action will solve the problem? Will making sure the student has written down the assignment correctly help? Will having the parent sign the homework improve its quality? If the conference has been called to share an exceptionally excellent piece of work or a great report card, it might also help to brainstorm ways to appropriately recognize the child's achievement. Will a note from the parent be valued by the child? Would a special certificate be meaningful? Or, would the parents like to provide a treat at home? Involving the parents in the discussion of the problem as well as in the design of a solution helps to guarantee their full support.

In order to make sure the conference is a success, the teacher should conclude

the conference by briefly summarizing what has taken place. The parents, of course, should be encouraged to participate in any course of action formulated. Without the cooperation and support of the parents, even the best laid plans are likely to fail. Before the conference ends, notes should be reviewed and care should be taken to be certain the plan of action is clear to all.

END POSITIVELY

Even when conference topics have been difficult to discuss or address an attempt should be made to end the meeting on a positive note. When teachers and parents work together even very difficult problems get solved. Conclude the discussion of the plan of action with a restatement of the roles the parent, the teacher, and the child will assume. Establish a reasonable time-table for the implementation and

accomplishment of the plan. Also a date and time for a future conference may be set if deemed necessary. Above all the conference should conclude on a note of confidence and mutual respect. If the conference is centered on problems, teachers should let the parent know that they are optimistic about solving them. It is very important to reassure the parent that the problem is not the child. The problem is a specific set of behaviors or situation which is a problem for the child, parents, and teacher to overcome. "Giving parents a sense of participation and promoting a bond of cooperation between the parent and teacher will result in conferences which are less anxious and adversarial and more focused on improving the quality of instruction" (Simmons, 1991, p. 122).

WORKING WITH THE RESISTANT OR AGGRESSIVE PARENT

Nearly all beginning and many veteran teachers experience some degree of "parentphobia". In other words, teachers are at times worried about encounters with parents who are in an antagonistic or hostile mood. By and large such fears are unfounded as both parents and teachers want the same thing, namely, a well-behaved, well-adjusted and academically successful student. Most parents, like most teachers, are pleasant, cooperative, and kindly people. However, each teacher sooner or later encounters parents who are angry or who have some personal problems which lead them to act in a hostile manner. This is most likely to occur when a child is not doing well and when the trust relationship between the parents and the teacher has not been adequately developed and nurtured.

Therefore, when an explosive situation appears to be in the making, it is up to the teacher to defuse it as quickly as possible. The teacher's own verbal and nonverbal behavior becomes the critical elements. Bluestein (1989) offers teachers the following DOs for dealing with the aggressive parent (p.19).

1. make certain you address all their concerns.
2. ask them to clarify any complaints that are too general.
3. show them the list [of concerns] and ask if it is complete.
4. ask them for suggestions for solving any of the problems listed.
5. write down the suggestions.
6. speak softly if they speak loudly.

Bailard and Strang (1964) offer the following

DON'Ts (p. 533):

1. Don't put the parent on the defensive about anything.
2. Don't talk about other children or compare this child with other children.
3. Don't talk about other teachers to the parents unless the remarks are of a complimentary nature.
4. Don't belittle the administration or make derogatory remarks about the school district.

5. Don't argue with the parent.
6. Don't try to outtalk a parent.
7. Don't interrupt the parent to make your own point.
8. Don't go too far with a parent who is not ready and able to understand your purpose.
9. Don't ask parents questions which might be embarrassing to them. Only information pertinent to the child's welfare is important. Questions asked out of mere curiosity are unforgivable.
10. After the conference, don't repeat any confidential information which the parent may volunteer.

Perhaps one of the best ways to calm parents is to be sympathetic to their feelings. Teachers who sense hostility or resistance should first examine themselves, asking "What am I doing that may be offensive to the parent? Am I causing or adding to the problem?" Such self analysis can often help teachers approach parents in a more sensitive manner. An experienced teacher explained that she always says to an upset parent, "I can appreciate your feelings of frustration but remember I really want to support you. It is you who must provide

for the life long education of your child. I will only have the privilege of 180 days. Please help me to understand how I can help you."

If parental behavior is clearly counter productive, such as attending the conference in an intoxicated state or evidencing abusive language or the possibility of violent behavior, the teacher should politely but firmly terminate the conference offering to reschedule at a time when productive discussions can be held. This being done the teacher should immediate leave the setting and inform a supervisor of the action taken.

DOCUMENTATION

Whether the conference is in person or by telephone, it should be documented. For that matter, so should any attempted contacts. In other word, if teachers

request a conference and then the parents are no-shows it should be documented. If the teacher calls and someone other than the parents answer or if they get the answering machine, documentation is useful. Such information can be very helpful if later questions or conflicts should arise. After each conference, a summary of what happened should be recorded. A statement should be made regarding the purpose of the conference, the primary points of discussion, and the recommended courses of action. The information is then filed in a system easily accessible to the teacher, such as index cards or a computer. Quick and easy access to such information may prevent many misunderstandings and further the cause of clear open communication between home and school. Some teachers keep a calendar on a flip chart or in a file box to ensure periodic phone calls to parents.

Of course, any time the teacher attempts to contact parents, whether by telephone or by letter or note home, some form of documentation should occur. A sample contact log is given below.

Contact Log for: Travis Johnson

Date	Time	Type of Contact	Person Contacted	Content
9-1-91	8:05 AM	Phone call	Mrs. Johnson	Invited Mrs. Johnson to meet to talk about Travis completing homework.
9-3-92	4:00 PM	Conference at school	Mrs. Johnson	Planned ways to encourage Travis to do homework. Ms. Lopez to provide an assignment sheet. Mrs. Johnson to sign sheet & schedule a time/place for homework 1 hour per night before supper.
9-9-92	9:03 AM	Phone call From Mrs.Johnson	Mrs. Johnson	Mrs. Johnson says Travis is doing his homework.

(From R.L.Meese. Teaching Learners With Mild Disabilities: Integrating Research and Practice. (In-press) Pacific Grove, CA. Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.)

CONCLUSION

The concept of a teacher parent alliance is essential to the type of communication which is most effective. Teachers and parents need to perceive themselves as a united team of caring adults who work together to appropriately support the physical, emotional and intellectual development of the child. Such a relationship requires acceptance, trust, respect, clarity, and honesty. While these are qualities inherent to many successful human relationships, they are also qualities which may not come easily to adults who tend to communicate infrequently, rarely communicate face-to-face, and more often than not communicate about frustrations for which to some degree, they hold each other responsible. The task then for a teacher wishing to establish a facilitative, effective alliance with parents is to

communicate often, to invite and encourage parental presence in the classroom, and when communicating about problems, to expect some degree of initial uncertainty or defensiveness while modeling a high degree of the acceptance, trust, respect, clarity, and honesty seen as essential to building the teacher parent alliance.

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